

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter lays the foundation for understanding how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students interact with digital visual texts, particularly memes, through the lens of perception bias. It covers the background of the study, outlines the research questions and objectives, explains its significance and scope, presents the conceptual framework, and reviews relevant previous studies.

A. Background

In the digital age, understanding how perception bias shapes English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' interpretation of digital media especially memes has become increasingly crucial for fostering critical literacy. Technological advancements have significantly transformed how individuals, particularly EFL students, engage with digital texts and media content. For EFL learners, platforms such as social media and online communities are not merely tools for communication but dynamic spaces where language, culture, and ideology intersect (Prensky, 2001). Therefore, developing digital literacy has become a key component of English education today. Digital literacy is defined as the ability to interpret and evaluate information across various digital formats (Gilster, 1997).

Among the various forms of digital communication, memes have emerged as a dominant mode of visual expression that integrates humor, language, and cultural references. They combine images, text, and humor, making them engaging but also complex (Shifman, 2014). To truly understand a meme, students need more than linguistic competence they require visual literacy, cultural knowledge, and critical thinking skills. For EFL learners, this process can be challenging, especially when the cultural context is unfamiliar (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Given the pervasive presence of memes in online spaces, students should be encouraged to engage critically with digital content and interpret the social and cultural meanings embedded within these texts.

Based on preliminary observations conducted by the researcher during classroom discussions and informal learning activities in an EFL context, it was found that many students experienced difficulties in interpreting the intended meaning of English-language memes. When presented with several popular memes taken from social media platforms, students tended to focus primarily on the literal meaning of the text or the visual elements, often overlooking irony, satire, or underlying social messages. Some students misinterpreted sarcastic memes as serious statements, while others failed to recognize implicit ideological or cultural assumptions embedded in the images. These findings indicate that students' interpretations were frequently influenced by their personal experiences, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds, leading to biased or partial understandings of the memes.

Despite their popularity, memes often contain implicit ideological or cultural messages that are difficult for EFL learners to decode without contextual familiarity. Individual interpretation is influenced by personal schemas and prior beliefs. Many memes rely on irony, satire, or culturally specific humor that may not be immediately apparent to those outside the originating culture (Dynel, 2016). Some memes convey implicit political or social messages that require deeper interpretative engagement. Understanding such content involves questioning the message's intent, authorship, and perspective (Walsh, 2020). Moreover, interpretation is inherently shaped by prior experiences and cultural frameworks. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of perception bias the tendency to interpret information in ways consistent with one's pre-existing assumptions (Wang, 2020; Nickerson, 1998). For instance, when a meme employs irony or sarcasm, students may misinterpret its underlying message if their interpretation is filtered through personal or cultural biases.

The interpretation of memes is further influenced by perception bias cognitive tendencies that cause individuals to process information based on personal beliefs or emotions. Recognizing such bias is a vital part of developing critical literacy. Paul and Elder (2008) argue that critical thinkers must be aware of how both words and images shape opinions. Similarly, Janks (2010) emphasizes that critical literacy encourages learners to ask important questions such as: Whose voices are

represented here? Whose are missing? These questions are particularly relevant when analyzing biased or one-sided digital content. Although numerous studies have examined bias in written texts, news articles, and classroom discourse (e.g., Paul & Elder, 2008; Janks, 2010), there remains a lack of research on how EFL students recognize and analyze bias in visual and multimodal digital texts such as memes. Previous works on memes in education (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Chambers et al., 2022; Petrova, 2021) have primarily addressed their role in promoting digital literacy and student engagement, but few have explored the cognitive or perceptual filters influencing how learners interpret them. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining EFL students' ability to analyze bias in memes through the lens of perception bias, offering insights into how cognitive tendencies interact with critical media literacy in EFL contexts.

In summary, the growing dominance of digital visual communication particularly through memes highlights the need for EFL students to engage in more critical and reflective reading practices. Despite increasing attention to digital and visual literacy, little is known about how cognitive factors, specifically perception bias, affect learners' interpretation of multimodal texts. Therefore, this study investigates EFL students' ability to identify and analyze bias in memes through the framework of perception bias, focusing on how individual beliefs and experiences shape interpretation. The findings are expected to contribute to the field of English language education by providing insights into the integration of critical media literacy and cognitive awareness in language learning, fostering learners who can engage with digital content more analytically, critically, and ethically.

B. Research Questions

Based on the background of the study, the research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How is the teaching of EFL students implemented to help them analyze bias in memes using perception bias?
2. How is EFL students' ability to analyze bias in memes using perception bias?

3. What are EFL students' experiences in analyzing bias in memes using perception bias?

C. Research Purposes

The aims of this research are as follows:

1. To examine EFL students' understanding of how to analyze bias in memes using perception bias.
2. To assess EFL students' ability to analyze bias in memes using perception bias.
3. To explore EFL students' experiences in analyze bias in memes using perception bias.

D. Research Significances

The researcher expects that this study will contribute to the field of English language teaching and learning. The findings are anticipated to offer practical implications for several stakeholders involved in language education, as outlined below:

1. Practical Significances

a. For EFL Teachers

The findings of this study can assist EFL teachers in developing pedagogical strategies that promote critical media literacy and bias awareness among students. By understanding how perception bias influences learners' interpretation of memes and other digital texts, teachers can design classroom activities that foster reflective discussion, critical questioning, and analytical engagement with online content. Such approaches enable learners to move beyond surface-level comprehension toward deeper interpretative and evaluative awareness.

b. For Researcher

This study provides a valuable reference for future investigations at the intersection of cognitive psychology, visual literacy, and language learning. Given that the application of perception bias theory in EFL education remains relatively limited, this research can inform comparative or experimental studies exploring how learners process and evaluate multimodal materials such as memes, infographics, and social media texts.

c. For Language Program Managers

The results of this study can serve as a foundation for language program managers innovation by integrating digital and multimodal literacy components into English language programs. Understanding students' tendencies toward perceptual bias can guide language program manager designers in creating learning tasks that encourage students to analyze, interpret, and critically evaluate online media. This integration can help align English language instruction with the realities of digital communication in the modern world.

2. Theoretical Significances

Theoretically, this research contributes to the growing discourse on critical literacy and cognitive processing within EFL contexts. It bridges perspectives from cognitive psychology, particularly the concept of perception bias with theories of critical media literacy and multimodal analysis. By doing so, the study offers a conceptual framework for understanding how personal cognition, beliefs, and experiences mediate students' interpretation of visual-verbal texts. This theoretical integration enriches ongoing discussions in applied linguistics and opens new avenues for research on critical thinking within digital language learning environments.

E. Theoretical Framework

In the digital era, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning is increasingly mediated through multimodal and visually oriented content such as memes, GIFs,

and social media texts. To analyze how students interpret such texts through the lens of perception bias, this study integrates three major theoretical perspectives: Critical Media Literacy (CML), Multimodal Analysis, and Perception Bias Theory. Each theory complements the others and collectively provides the conceptual foundation for understanding how cognition, media, and language intersect in digital communication.

The theory of Critical Media Literacy (CML), developed by Kellner and Share (2007), extends beyond functional media use to emphasize critical engagement with texts, power structures, and ideological representations. CML encourages learners to question whose voices are represented and whose are marginalized within media discourse. In EFL contexts, it provides a framework for fostering critical reading and interpretative awareness when engaging with multimodal texts such as memes. As Perks (2023) highlights, CML strengthens students' ability to identify ideological bias in both linguistic and visual messages. Therefore, CML serves as the ideological foundation of this study, guiding how EFL students approach and critique media-based content.

Multimodal Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) offers a methodological framework for examining how meaning is constructed through the combination of linguistic, visual, and contextual modes. In the case of memes, humor, irony, and symbolism are not conveyed solely through language but emerge through the interplay of image, layout, and caption. Recent studies (Siegel, 2024; Ugalingan et al., 2022) confirm that EFL learners can uncover ideological and cultural meanings by analyzing such multimodal structures. Within this research, multimodal analysis functions as an analytical approach to examine how perception bias manifests in students' interpretations of visual-verbal cues in memes.

The concept of Perception Bias, rooted in cognitive psychology (Kahneman, 2011; Nickerson, 1998), explains how individuals' beliefs, emotions, and prior experiences influence interpretation. In educational contexts, perception bias may limit objectivity when students interpret messages that conflict with their existing worldviews. As Smith (2024) observes, learners who lack critical media literacy often accept digital content at face value, unaware of its embedded bias. In this

study, perception bias theory is used to explain how internal cognitive filters shape EFL students' interpretations of memes and to identify whether their analytical responses demonstrate awareness of bias.

Together, these three frameworks CML, Multimodal Analysis, and Perception Bias provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing how students decode digital texts. While CML establishes the ideological dimension of critical reading, multimodal analysis operationalizes the textual and visual aspects of meme interpretation, and perception bias accounts for the cognitive and affective influences underlying students' interpretive processes. This integrated framework underpins the development of analytical rubrics and interview protocols used in this study to assess students' ability to identify, question, and explain bias in memes.

By positioning EFL students as active interpreters of digital culture, this framework bridges cognitive psychology, media studies, and language education. It supports the view that effective EFL instruction should cultivate not only linguistic competence but also critical and reflective media literacy, enabling learners to interpret multimodal messages with both cultural awareness and cognitive sensitivity.

Evidence from previous studies consistently suggests that mastery of critical media literacy and multimodal analysis significantly enhances students' ability to detect bias in digital texts. Research by Romero and Bobkina (2021), Perks (2023), and Miliopoulou (2025) demonstrates that media-based instruction particularly through memes not only enriches students' vocabulary but also broadens their understanding of the socio-political dynamics embedded in texts, thereby strengthening their critical thinking as EFL learners.

Through this theoretical framework, the present study establishes a clear analytical direction: to measure the extent to which EFL students can identify and interpret bias in memes, and to examine how this ability relates to their critical media literacy and the multimodal structure of memes. The framework also informs the design of research instruments, including a rubric for assessing multimodal reading skills and qualitative tools for measuring bias perception.

Ultimately, this study views EFL students as active thinkers capable of critically engaging with authentic digital content such as memes. By applying the principles of critical media literacy, students learn to interpret messages with depth and awareness, while acknowledging how their internal biases influence understanding. The interaction between media literacy skills and perception bias shapes the depth of students' interpretation and critique of media texts. Exploring this relationship offers valuable insights into how learners read, question, and respond to digital content in more informed and reflective ways.

F. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is derived from an integration of three established theoretical perspectives: Critical Media Literacy, Multimodal Analysis, and Perception Bias Theory. Rather than standing as isolated theories, these perspectives are synthesized to explain the process through which EFL students interpret bias in memes as multimodal digital texts.

The first component of the framework, Teaching of Critical Media Literacy, is grounded in the work of Kellner and Share (2007), who conceptualize Critical Media Literacy (CML) as an educational approach that enables learners to critically analyze media texts by questioning power relations, ideology, representation, and authorship. In the context of this study, CML informs how instruction is implemented to guide EFL students in critically engaging with memes. This pedagogical dimension of the framework directly relates to Research Question 1, which focuses on how teaching practices support students' ability to analyze bias using perception bias.

The second component, Memes as Multimodal Texts, draws on Multimodal Discourse Theory proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). According to this theory, meaning is constructed through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes, including language, images, layout, and symbols. Memes, as visual-verbal texts, require learners to interpret both linguistic and visual cues simultaneously. Therefore, multimodal analysis skills are positioned in the framework as a crucial analytical process that enables students to decode how bias is embedded in the

combination of text and image. This component provides the analytical bridge between instructional input and students' interpretative outcomes.

The third theoretical foundation of the framework is Perception Bias Theory, rooted in cognitive psychology. Scholars such as Nickerson (1998) and Kahneman (2011) explain perception bias as the tendency of individuals to interpret information based on prior beliefs, emotions, and cultural experiences. In this framework, perception bias is conceptualized as a moderating cognitive factor that influences how students apply critical media literacy and multimodal analysis when interpreting memes. This means that even when students possess analytical skills, their interpretations may still be shaped or limited by internal cognitive filters. This component is central to understanding Research Question 2, which examines students' ability to analyze bias, and Research Question 3, which explores students' subjective experiences during the analysis process.

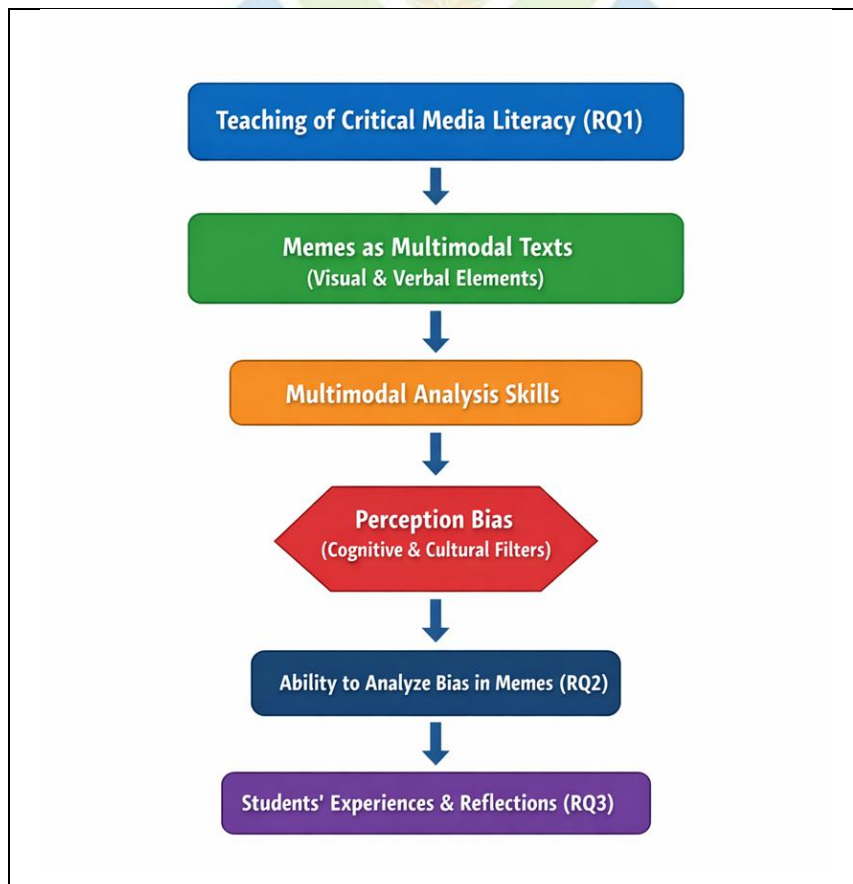


Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework

The outcome of the interaction among these components is represented as EFL students' ability to analyze bias in memes, followed by students' experiences and reflections. These outcomes reflect not only students' analytical competence but also their awareness of their own biases and interpretative challenges. Thus, the framework conceptualizes meme interpretation as a dynamic process influenced by instructional practices, textual features, analytical skills, and cognitive bias.

In summary, the conceptual framework illustrated in Figure X is theoretically informed by:

- a. Critical Media Literacy (Kellner & Share, 2007) as the pedagogical and ideological foundation,
- b. Multimodal Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) as the analytical approach to meme interpretation, and
- c. Perception Bias Theory (Nickerson, 1998; Kahneman, 2011) as the cognitive lens explaining individual differences in interpretation.

By integrating these theories, the framework provides a coherent explanation of how EFL students learn to analyze bias in memes and how their interpretations are shaped by both external textual features and internal cognitive processes. This integration ensures strong alignment between the theoretical foundation, the conceptual framework, and the research questions of the study.

F. Previous Studies

Numerous studies have examined the role of digital texts and memes in language education; however, few have investigated the cognitive mechanisms that shape students' interpretation of such multimodal content. Chambers et al. (2022), in *Building ESL Learners' Digital Literacy Skills Using Internet Memes*, proposed the integration of memes as pedagogical tools to develop learners' digital literacy. Their findings emphasized the potential of memes in fostering engagement and creative expression. However, their study primarily focused on literacy outcomes and did not explore how individual perceptions or cognitive biases influence interpretation.

Basile (2022), in *Bias, Subjectivity, and Perspectives in Natural Language Processing*, examined linguistic and computational bias in text processing. While the study highlighted how subjectivity shapes interpretation, it did not extend its analysis to visual or multimodal contexts a limitation that the present research aims to address by investigating memes as visual-verbal texts. By focusing on how perception bias influences meaning-making in memes, this study expands the discussion of bias beyond textual analysis into the realm of digital visual communication.

Petrova (2021), in *Meme Language: Its Impact on Digital Culture and Collective Thinking*, explored how memes influence collective cognition in online environments. Her findings revealed that memes function as cultural artifacts reflecting shared ideologies. Although this aligns with the present study's interest in social meaning-making, Petrova's research did not examine how learners' internal biases mediate interpretation. Building on this limitation, the present study focuses on how perception bias shapes EFL students' understanding of memes as multimodal texts, extending the discussion into the context of language learning and critical media literacy.

Gallegos et al. (2024), in *Promoting Critical Thinking and Reading Comprehension in Higher Education Students Through Digital Texts*, demonstrated that digital materials can enhance students' critical literacy. However, their research concentrated primarily on textual comprehension rather than multimodal or image-based analysis, leaving an important dimension unexplored. The current study addresses this gap by examining how perception bias operates when EFL students engage with visual-verbal texts such as memes, thereby extending critical literacy discussions into multimodal contexts.

Weissler et al. (2023), in *Examining Linguistic and Experimenter Biases Through "Non-Native" Versus "Native" Speech*, uncovered the presence of implicit bias in listeners' judgments toward non-native accents. This finding supports the current study's focus on perception bias by demonstrating that bias operates subconsciously, influencing how individuals evaluate linguistic input.

Collectively, these studies illustrate the growing intersection between digital literacy, bias recognition, and EFL education. However, few have explored how perception bias specifically affects EFL students' ability to identify and interpret bias within memes texts that are simultaneously visual, cultural, and linguistic. Thus, the present research seeks to fill this gap by integrating insights from cognitive psychology, critical media literacy, and multimodal analysis to examine how EFL students perceive, interpret, and critique memes as digital texts laden with ideological meaning.

